

REVIEW OF RESEARCHING ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE INTERACTION AND EXCHANGE: THEORIES, METHODS, AND CHALLENGES

Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange: Theories, Methods and Challenges

Melinda Dooly & Robert O'Dowd (Eds.)

2012

ISBN: 978-3034311557

US

347 pp.

Peter Lang

New York, US



Review by Linda Bradley, Chalmers University of Technology

Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange, edited by Melinda Dooly and Robert O'Dowd, is the third book in a series by Peter Lang on telecollaboration in education. This third edited volume maps out topical aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in online exchange research in three sections: theoretical approaches, key areas of research, and research methods. The three sections consist of chapters authored by specialists in each field. The book provides overviews of topical areas of interest for telecollaboration research, and it serves as valuable input for anyone interested in research in online foreign language interaction and exchange environments.

In this time, when online interaction and exchange in foreign language (FL) education has increased, researchers are faced with a range of decisions to make regarding research frameworks, methods, task designs, and ethical issues, as well as with conceptual questions related to defining constructs such as intercultural competence and multimodality. This volume provides insights into prevailing theoretical approaches, together with key areas of research and many of the methods used to investigate FL interaction and exchange in online environments. This area is relatively new within the field of CALL due to what Dooly and O'Dowd describe as a combination of various developments. These developments are related to technical aspects, such as the increase in user-friendly technologies in educational contexts, cheaper computer hardware, and widespread access to internet connections, but other reasons also factor into recent growth. They outline the first reason as the importance of acknowledging culture in FL learning, particularly in cases in which online intercultural interaction plays an important role. A second reason is the growth of the sociocultural processes whereby learning is understood as the meaningful use of language in interaction. The third reason they attribute to both the growing importance of online technologies in shaping the ways we work and learn in global networks, and to how FL competence and e-literacies have emerged as components within the new set of skills required of individuals in response to changing labor markets.

The book provides a comprehensive historical overview of the research to date on online language learning. Dooly and O'Dowd describe this history as first appearing as collections of accounts of classroom practice and anecdotal research, but then moving to more in-depth empirical studies. They describe three general categories of online interaction and exchange for the purpose of FL learning. The first category is in-class interaction, which refers to online networks for students to interact in one particular class through synchronous communication in chats, MOOs and local area networks. Many of these in-class interaction studies focus on the interactionist perspective to FL education and psycholinguistic theories of SLA. The second category, class-to-class interaction, often termed telecollaboration, came with improved online connectivity. Both asynchronous communication tools evolved such as discussion forums, blogs, wikis, synchronous oral communication, and multimodal technologies. With these studies, the sociocultural perspective of learning plays a predominant theoretical framing role. The third category of class-to-world interaction describes contexts in which learners enter into contact with others globally, but not in communication organized formally by the instructor. Rather, learners collaborate in specialized interest communities or environments outside of the classroom context, which opens up a blurring of boundaries of the traditional classroom with other communicative environments.

Section I. Theoretical Approaches to Researching Online Exchange

In the first of three chapters in this section, Jonathon Reinhardt gives an overview over the function of the interactionist approach and socio-cognitive perspectives. These two frameworks are examined by focusing on methodological approaches and the areas of overlap they share, including the concept of interaction and negotiation of meaning. He offers examples of key findings from each approach to illustrate the underlying concepts and to discuss critiques of these approaches. As a response to some of the issues in this debate, Reinhardt examines the ecological approach that can offer new insights into SLA. He elaborates on the discussions of acquisition and learning within applied linguistics and foreign language acquisition and development. He emphasizes that interaction must be understood broadly since negotiation of meaning is not bound to an input-interactionist framework. One way forward is adopting an ecological approach for understanding learning. Such an approach transcends our most recent conceptualizations of technology from originating in mainframes and social processing units but also in the individual use of personal computers as among the many tools available in today's distributed, networked, and ubiquitous gadgets.

In the next chapter, *Introducing Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) for Research CMC in Foreign Language Education*, Françoise Blin gives an overview of CHAT and discusses the basic concepts and principles by drawing on examples from studies with a connection to CMC. Activity theory aims to understand human beings in their everyday life circumstances, seeing individuals as context-bound. The chapter brings up activity theory, built on interconnected relationships in the form of triangles that display the relationships between students (subjects), the object that they are engaged in, and the larger context of community. All connections are made by tools and artifacts, rules and division of labour. Blin suggests that we have reached the third generation of activity theory. In this chapter, activity systems are illustrated with examples of how telecollaboration transforms activity systems and provides ethnographic data.

In the final chapter of the first section, Paige Ware and Brenna Rivas investigate mixed methods approaches to analyzing data. They suggest a combination of qualitative and quantitative data approaches to investigating learning and show that much of the research on telecollaboration has been examined with a qualitative lens that, appropriately, relies on close contextualization of such projects. They suggest that mixed methods might offer a unique way to examine online exchanges in the particular context of secondary education where different types of institutional constraints are in place. They illustrate the unique challenges of the secondary context in the final part of their chapter through a case study of a

telecollaboration between adolescent learners in Spain and the US.

Section II. Key Areas of Research: Tasks, Culture, Multimodality, and Virtual Worlds

In the first chapter out of four in this section, Melinda Dooly and Mirjam Hauck emphasize the need to embrace multimodal communicative competence (MCC) in telecollaborative language learning research. The central question for researchers is deciding what may be considered researchable in multimodal data. For example, they show how exchanges can rely on a variety of constellations of asynchronous and synchronous online tools. Interestingly, in analyzing such data, they argue that written and spoken language are still the two most prominent areas of interest, whereas modalities such as intonation and gestures are more often described in relation to spoken and written language and not as separate meaning making and communication modes in their own right. According to Dooly and Hauck, exploring the MCC field is challenging but promising “for future researchers willing to explore expanding parameters of communication that is opening up, exponentially, with each new generation of language learners” (p. 154). The chapter discusses the complexity involved in multimodal data collection and analysis and the challenges of achieving transparency in the research process.

In the second chapter of this section, *The Classroom-Based Action Research Paradigm in Telecollaboration*, Andreas Müller-Hartman gives an account of action research and activity theory connected to telecollaboration. His focus is on teachers’ competence development within telecollaborative projects, such as their development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), multimodal competence, and teaching competence. Since telecollaborative studies are mostly conducted by researchers who are also practitioners, the case study approach is suggested as a frame for the research context. In such situations, instructors do not come to the contexts as outsiders. Such approaches allow studies to consist of complex interrelations of environments and their agents. For the case study approach, he argues that activity theory can help researchers to understand the complex processes taking place and to gain the perspectives of the participants. He illustrates three different forms of competence: multiliteracy competences, task-based language teaching competences (TBLT), and intercultural communicative competences (ICC) by drawing on a sample case study.

The next chapter, by Luisa Panichi and Mats Deutschmann, gives a balanced review of learning in virtual worlds. They argue that virtual worlds can be used in telecollaborative activities as environments for explorations because the synchronous aspects of virtual worlds resemble face-to-face meetings. This real-time effect also affects such aspects as designing and monitoring tasks. They outline the affordances for communication offered by virtual environments and tackle one of the main challenges of telecollaboration, that of designing meaningful activities. They show how it is possible to build virtual environments and to use avatars to communicate through non-verbal cues. They discuss the complexity of this new type of environment with a focus on the emergence of new ethical and copyright issues.

In the final chapter of this section, *Intercultural Competence in Computer-Mediated-Communication: An Analysis of Research Methods*, Martina Möllering and Mike Levy offer insight specifically into the intercultural side of online communication. They provide an overview of what the intercultural turn has meant for research and outline themes that emerge from selected studies that use sociocultural theory to frame ICC. They explore underlying constructs of culture, including dimensions such as elemental, group membership, contested, and individual. They claim that research in ICC is multifaceted because the concept of culture itself is quite complex.

Section III. Research Methods for Online Interaction and Exchange

In the first chapter out of the two in this last section describing methodological challenges and potentials, Nina Vyatkina shows how corpus analysis methods and tools can be used when examining telecollaborative discourse in her chapter: *Applying the Methodology of Learner Corpus Analysis of*

Telecollaborative Discourse. Using CMC learner corpora in telecollaborative studies implies accessing data that is automatically saved and thus immediately available for research. In addition, native-speaker and non-native speaker contrasts are built into the corpus for further elaboration. The researcher can thereby easily get an insider view on the study context, which enriches the ethnographic dimension. This added information enhances the ecological validity of the learner corpus as well as the findings based on its data. Vyatkina also emphasizes the advantage of telecollaboration corpora in offering a wide array of discourse types and linguistic features. Her chapter highlights an example of the application of the Telekorp corpus that is based on exchanged emails and chats, and she explores the use of German modal particles as used by both learners and by native speakers of German. Her conclusion discusses analytical tools for telecollaboration corpus research design, including both proprietary corpus software as well as open source corpus software.

In the final chapter of the book, *Using Eye-Tracking to Investigate Gaze Behaviour in Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication for Language Learning*, Breffni O'Rourke brings up the relatively new research area in the application of eye-tracking to synchronous, text-based computer-mediated communication for language learning. In this chapter, three different analyses of eye-tracking devices are reported in which native speakers of English were learning a foreign language by interacting in a text-based virtual environment. As eye-tracking tools become more accessible and easier to use, he argues that it is likely that they will be used more for telecollaboration research.

In *Researching Online Foreign Language Interaction and Exchange*, Dooly and O'Dowd present some of the most topical theoretical and methodological research trends within telecollaboration in education. This book contributes with its insights into applications of approaches for both initiated researchers but also for novices in the field of CALL. It maps out existing research as well as suggestions of where the field is heading. The interaction and exchange aspects of online studies are increasing since mobility is spreading. Although there is no specific chapter attributed to mobile learning in the book, this topic comes up in some of the chapters. The two previous books in the series have focused on more specific areas of telecollaboration: Guth and Helm discussing the concept of telecollaboration 2.0 and Sadler examining virtual worlds. Dooly and O'Dowd's book offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary notions of the most recent practices in telecollaboration. In sum, this book attracts anyone interested in research in online foreign language learning interactions and exchanges. It offers valuable input regarding current aspects of CMC and telecollaboration.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Linda Bradley recently finished her PhD within the area of web-based technology and learning at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Her research interests include investigating student collaboration, communication and intercultural learning in digital environments in language learning and specifically within English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher education.

E-mail: linda.bradley@chalmers.se